

Smoke Out and Eliminate Pesky Long-Term Problems

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One of my college roommates often invited girl friends to visit for the weekend. It was challenge for him to make a good impression during those visits because my roommate's clothes, snacks, cigarettes, ash trays, books, and papers were strewn everywhere.

He also wasn't very energetic: After arising late, he was normally sprawled on our broken-down couch smoking while he watching bowling tournaments and sit-coms.

When his girl friends were from a neighboring state, he made it a point of honor to meet them at the train station. This alteration from his relaxed routine didn't come easily. How could he get a lot of sleep on Saturday morning, clean up the room, and still get to the station on time? His answer was to get out of bed about ten minutes before leaving for the train; throw a quilt over his unmade bed; stuff the accumulated squalor of the week under the couch cushions, bed, and desk where they couldn't easily be seen; shower; and dress.

As you can imagine, the room wasn't really clean. And he would waste quite a bit of time the following week looking for things that he had crammed out of sight.

While he was happy with that solution, some of our other roommates weren't. His approach was a pesky, long-term problem for those who really wanted to live in neat, clean surroundings.

Although we roomed together for three years, he never changed his habits.

In business, something similar happens: There's a problem that annoys everyone, but no one fixes the problem.

I first saw this circumstance in business while I was a young management consultant. A division president hired me to look into whether he should go out of a certain line of business that was showing continuing

slight losses. I was excited that this trust had been placed in me, and I eagerly headed off to visit the plant.

Once there, I was chagrined to learn that I was the eighth consultant dispatched to look into this issue during the last several years. The plant manager patiently explained that 80 percent of the plant was devoted to making products for this line of business. If the plant stopped making those products, many of the costs to operate the plant would continue and the remaining products would be much less profitable after fixed costs were reallocated to them.

Naturally, I delivered the same news that my seven predecessors had: I indicated that the only reasonable way to exit this line of business was to shut down the plant, take a large write-off, and contract others to make the remaining products. My client was told by his superiors not to take a write-off, and that was that.

Thirty years later, the company finally left that line of business when the parent company was acquired by a larger firm. The write-off became part of the one-time acquisition charges, and no one cared if the loss was taken then.

Whenever I have come up against problems that everyone knows about but no one can solve as a youngster, I find myself wishing that I knew more about what to do. Having worked as a strategist for over four decades, I now know a whole parcel-full of ways to undo such problems.

Most people don't want to spend four decades learning how to get rid of persistent problems. While corresponding with an MBA graduate, Thomas Arnebeck, I was recently reminded of a short-cut: You can learn to identify root causes of problems and the sources of attitudes that limit the ability to change, and become effective in devising solutions that eliminate the root causes while changing attitudes.

Why is this good for business people to learn as soon as they can?

1. They will be sought after by those who cannot solve these difficult challenges for themselves.

2. Their value to the organization that employs them will be much higher.
3. They will enjoy much satisfaction from creating positive results.

Here's how Mr. Arnebeck characterized his experiences as such a problem solver:

“My greatest enjoyment comes from taking difficult problems that many times have plagued an organization for long periods of time, and then locating and implementing permanent solutions.”

“I have been tasked repeatedly with taking on troubled areas in companies. The trouble stems for thought, beliefs, actions and attitudes. It is vital to deal with changing people's way of thinking in order to improve how things in a company operates.”

“I find the nature and intensity involved in locating the root causes and implementing plans to turn around troubled organizations exhilarating. This work makes every day very important and meaningful. It also makes the work life of those you are working with better in teaching them to be problem solvers.”

“Afterwards, I feel gratified when I see and hear from the people I am working with how pleased they are to be more profitable and to clearly see and understand how big problems can be overcome successfully.”

Sounds good, doesn't it?

How did Mr. Arnebeck develop such valuable skills in less than two decades? He has an endless curiosity and liked the fact that solving problems completely allowed him the freedom to redirect his curiosity in new directions.

Satisfying his curiosity taught him that finding root causes of problems was mainly a matter of asking lots of questions. The answers direct you to different actions than what is being done now. Like me, he found it more difficult to understand how to change the attitudes that prevented the right changes from being made.

How do others get into trouble with persistent problems? Lacking curiosity about why problems occur, many people just take any action that looks like it will get the results they seek. Such efforts are often directed towards poorly defined goals and frequently lead to unreflective, hurried activity that creates new problems.

The other way to solve persistent problems is to learn about the processes involved and then to continually improve the processes as they are used. This problem-solving method delivers enhanced results more consistently. Here's what Mr. Arnebeck said about how this change can occur:

“When a person or group closely investigates a problem and begins to measure the impact of a problem, there is frequently a growth in their curiosity. Once the curiosity comes to life, a real interest develops in how to correct the problem. When a different set of steps are taken and measurable improvement takes place, a person can clearly see the value in a more thought-filled and focused approach.”

As a management consultant, Mr. Arnebeck worked with large companies to apply his process knowledge to increase productivity and profitability for those who wanted permanent improvements. He often found attitudes and behaviors in those companies similar to what I described about my college roommate: results were gained, but could be accomplished much more efficiently. Here's his take on these attitudes and behaviors:

“Showing that a different process was superior went hand in hand with changing attitudes and perspectives. Intertwining the psychological aspects and implementing process improvements clearly enhances the outcomes.”

From his work, Mr. Arnebeck realized that many problems stem from the thought processes and belief patterns of organizational leaders. He wanted to learn more about those subject matters and began studying for an MBA degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Rushmore University, where he focused on understanding more about individual and group behavior. He found the learning experience to be invigorating:

“Working with business experts who have successfully overcome extremely difficult situations numerous times provides a strong platform to educate and advise you on how to deal most effectively with organizational leaders.”

Working directly under the supervision of global experts in this subject, Mr. Arnebeck had many student opportunities to apply the mind-changing principles he learned to practical problems. Soon, he was making remarkable breakthroughs in eliminating thought processes and belief patterns that underlay persistent problems. Here is how his understanding improved:

“The top experts who have attained remarkable results in their field made it clear that understanding the underlying beliefs, attitudes and thought processes was vital in making a positive change. In order to fully comprehend others viewpoints you must ask the right questions. Working closely one on one with these experts over an extended period of time, I developed a deeper knowledge and understanding of why I sometimes did not do the best I could have.”

This new understanding helped him better understand all psychological and communication processes, which has added joy to his business and personal life. As an example, his wife, Denise, later earned a master’s degree in business communications, and the couple has enjoyed sharing insights from their respective educations.

Would you like to become a master of solving persistent problems? You can. You just need to decide to start learning how to find root causes and understand how to remove attitudes that retard useful changes.

When would you like to start?

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